

# LUCIFER'S WIFE

A NOVELETTE

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## CHAPTER I.

### The Master.



GRAY, sullen sea breaking along a gray, bleak coast; gray, frost-blighted meadows stretching away to where the forest line showed against a gray sky; and on the road this gray-eyed man. Looking, the girl's heart died.

Yet, after all, his escort formed a vivid relief of color in the somber scene, with their martial richness of costume and glint of costly arms. And the perfection of discipline with which they sat their horse, awaiting the leader's orders, was in marked contrast to the huddled confusion of the other group. The second party, of which the girl was one, was much the smaller and contained four women.

"So, Giles, you cross my lands?" asked the master of the situation, the gray-eyed man who held his horse motionless between the two parties.

"Yes, my lord," stammered the captain opposite, uncovering his head.

The other laughed contemptuously:

"Yes, you do well not to remind me that the lands belong to my father and are mine only by right of conquest! Yet you are a coward, too, for you think what you dare not say. You ride from the seaport?"

"On a peaceful errand, my lord."

"There can be no peace between your master and me. Which of these is the Lady Gabrielle?"

The man Giles turned hesitatingly, but before he could speak one of the

women pushed her palfrey forward, tossing back her veil.

"I, my lord!" she cried eagerly. The tall noble looked at her keenly and smiled.

"A comely face, mistress, and a faithful, but I can tell a Norman falcon from a wood-pigeon. Unveil, all; I will choose the lady."

The girl in the group's center had already advanced.

"Ellena's sacrifice could not have been accepted by me had you not detected it," she said, in her clear, soft, French voice. "I am Gabrielle de Foulke."

She drew aside her veil with dignity, a young girl whose beauty was of a type so delicate and fine as scarcely to draw coarser tastes; her most evident charm a complexion of exquisite, transparent purity, a pearl-like colorlessness that heightened the effect of her large, liquidly black eyes.

Long and steadily the noble gazed at her as she faced him, slight and straight in her black riding-dress.

"You are the one, truly," he slowly said. "I am Bertrand d'Arsy, of Falcommere. Does the name mean anything to you, Lady Gabrielle?"

"I have traveled from my convent in Rouen to become the wife of Oscar d'Arsy," she replied, proudly firm. "How should I not know of his elder brother? Count Bertrand, I am an orphan; the baron, your father, was not able to journey to Normandy, so at his wish I have come alone to this marriage. I beg of you to let us pass on our way to Castle Dare."



His cold face remained unstirred; his towering, superb figure had a steel-hard inflexibility of purpose.

"If you know even so much of me, lady, you know that my kinsmen and I are enemies of years standing. I will not let you pass to Oscar."

"I have done you no wrong, Count Bertrand," she cried.

"No. It is not you I strike, but them. They love you, therefore they shall not possess you."

She laid one small hand over her heart and looked at him. The men escorting her stood overawed and helpless; her maids huddled behind her in tears. One and all knew Bertrand, of Falconmere.

"You strike me also," she declared bravely. "I love your brother, sir."

"I am sorry for that. But you have been thrown on a battle-field, and must abide the issue."

She bit her lip to still its quiver.

"You will send me back to Normandy, then? It is hard, but I have no strength to resist you; I will go."

"No."

"No?" her terrified eyes flashed wide.

"No. Let them look for wife and daughter, and find the place empty! Let them turn to Falconmere and see her there! I take you for *my* wife, Lady Gabrielle—not from love, but from hate."

"My lord!" protested the horrified Giles, aroused at last.

Gabrielle gave a low cry, her head drooping forward to her horse's mane. The fearless Ellena slipped from her saddle and ran to her mistress's side, as a member of Bertrand's own escort pushed to the front—a white-haired priest riding a mule.

"Lord Bertrand, cannot even your mercilessness spare this child?" he remonstrated hotly. "Have you no fear of Heaven or pity for man? For *this*, you brought me here to-day?"

Count Bertrand nodded to him.

"Exactly. You will wed this lady to me, now."

"No, no, no," moaned Gabrielle.

Bertrand turned his glance that way, then suddenly dismounted and crossed to her side. Standing, his height was even more apparent; before his stately and indifferent bearing the men drew aside with respect, although he was separated from his own people and at the mercy of an unexpected blow.

"Raise your head and look at me," he directed calmly. "Can you read here any hope of escape? Did ever Oscar or the baron tell you I was relenting or easily moved from a purpose? As my wife, you go with me. I will not remind one so gently born and bred that you might have been taken otherwise."

She raised her head mechanically and met the gray eyes whose fame had awed a countryside.

"Be pitiful," she whispered, stifled. "Send me back! I will enter a convent; I will never see Sir Oscar again. Be satisfied with that."

"It is not enough."

"I will die!"

"You will marry me first."

She sank forward, half fainting. He swept her easily from the saddle into the curve of his arm, and turned to bear her to the line of his own men.

That audacity was too much. Knife in hand, the desperate Giles sprang forward, risking all on one lunge that should bury the blade between the noble's broad shoulders.

The attack was unforeseen, but Bertrand wheeled like a supple wrestler.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, and caught the man's wrist as it descended, twisting it mercilessly.

Giles screamed sharply. Without a change of expression Bertrand flung the crippled man away and went on. No one interfered. A shudder ran through the lesser group, and the women began to sob weakly, but even Ellena shrank back before the master's slight gesture.

"Now, go on," he ordered the priest. The old man stood his ground, bare-



headed and with his black gown fluttering in the wind, before the glittering company that had brought him there.

"My son, I will not wed you unless the lady bids," he refused undauntedly. "Not though you raise your hand against the church and take my life. And bethink you that there comes a reckoning one day."

Bertrand smiled ironically, setting Gabrielle on her feet and holding her to him that she might not fall.

"Well done, father! Few men have said 'will not' to me. There is no danger to you from my hand. For the lady's bidding—" He bent his head and spoke at her ear.

There were only a few sentences quietly given in his level tones, but as she listened the young girl shivered violently, putting her free hand across her eyes, her flowerlike face changing as under a blight.

"The lady consents," he finished.

"Do you bid me wed you to this man, daughter?" asked the good father, deeply troubled and distressed, yet helpless as she herself.

"Yes, since there is no help," she answered, her clear voice shattered and broken. "And pray for me."

"My lord, she is the baron's ward!" exclaimed Giles, starting up from where he had fallen. "There is no right in this! My lord, my lord—"

"Take him away, Cedric," said Bertrand curtly.

The lieutenant lifted his hand. Two or three men moved swiftly from their places, and Giles was passed a prisoner to the rear before resistance awoke. The men were in place again before the other party realized their leader's disappearance.

"Go on," was repeated to the priest.

There was no choice. Gabrielle rested against the encircling arm, white and giddy, her heavy fringe of black lashes lying on her cheeks. Unsmiling, passionless, Count Bertrand held her by his side and made the necessary responses.

Nearer and nearer the blond Ellen crept during the ceremony. When the last word was pronounced she held out hungry arms and Bertrand placed Gabrielle in them.

"You, who go to my father and brother," he addressed the group opposite, "report to them what you have seen. You will tell them I have taken home my wife. When they miss her, let them think of me. When they see an empty chair at Castle Dare, let them think of the woman who sits beside me at Falconmere. When they suffer, let them think of my peace."

He paused, his eyes resting upon the two girls who clung dumbly together. "And for their further pleasure, as well as in justice to the lady, tell them she hated her fate and struggled against it—tell them, in thinking of that, to remember my sister, Adela, who died before she was seventeen."

He turned aside, his lip curving contemptuously at the fascination of dread with which the others watched him.

"That is all," he signified. "Cedric, bring the countess's palfrey; we will go. Let four of your men stay and give this fellow Giles a lesson with their stirrup-leathers, then loose him and let him carry his aching shoulders to Castle Dare as a warning to cross me not! *Madame*, is it your wish to take your women with you, or shall I provide you with new attendants?"

Slowly Gabrielle drew herself erect.

"Do you leave the decision to me, my lord?" she asked.

"Yes, *madame*."

She faced the other party, no longer her guardians.

"You have seen what misfortune has befallen me, my maidens," she said, striving with pitiful courage to hold her dignity above despair. "I know not to what I go, or where. If any of you love me enough to follow, she shall be to me as a true sister, yet I ask it not and believe you wiser to go to Castle Dare, where for my sake the baron will care for you and send you home. Choose freely."



"Those who wish to go with their mistress may come to her side," Count Bertrand added with his chill authority. "Your service will be no different from what it would have been at Castle Dare, except that the Countess of Falconmere is a greater lady than Sir Oscar d'Arsey's wife would have been. Choose as she bids you!"

The women looked at each other, sobbing and pressing closer together, but none came across. Only Ellena put back the hair from her flushed, angry face and stepped forward to make her reverence to the man who ruled them all.

"So please you, my lord, I will stay with the Lady Gabrielle until I die."

"With—"

She struggled against it, biting her full, red lips in fruitless rebellion; but, in the end, Bertrand gained his victory without making move or word.

"With—the countess, my lord," the girl yielded sullenly.

"Good. You other maids"—he drew out a purse that tinkled plethorically with gold and silver coins, and tossed it to them—"you have not served my wife without payment. Cedric!"

The lieutenant had the lady's horse in readiness. When Gabrielle had been put in the saddle he stepped back and held the count's stirrup for him to mount.

Straight, slim, auburn-haired, rather effeminate in appearance, and a boy in stature beside his chief, no stranger could have guessed that Cedric Armstrong was only less dreaded far and wide than that chief himself. And Bertrand in his darkest moods could have framed no order that Cedric would not have fulfilled without the quiver of a muscle or a change of color in his ruddy face.

He saluted now, his eyes seeking his master's as he offered the reins.

"Well?" Bertrand demanded.

"My lord, with your permission I will stay with the men detailed. These animals may turn when you leave."

"Stay, then. Mount the countess's maid."

The command was promptly obeyed. Aroused by Ellena's movement from her side, Gabrielle drew the white veil across her face and obeyed Bertrand's signal to ride on with him.

"Lady!" cried Giles piteously, from his place among the men-at-arms. "Gracious lady, leave me not to these devils! Speak for me!"

Gabrielle reined in her horse, raising her beautiful, horrified eyes to her husband.

"My lord, he but tried to defend me," she pleaded faintly.

"I cannot revoke what I have spoken, *madame*."

"He was kind to me," she said, and turned away her head.

Bertrand regarded her strangely.

"Have you, in your own hour of pain, thought to spare for the aching shoulders of a peasant? Goes your charity so deep?" he asked, almost with mockery.

"I pray your grace for him," she insisted, too dazed and broken for other retort.

He turned half impatiently to the lieutenant.

"Let his lesson be gentle, Cedric," he amended briefly. "Hold your heavy hand in limits."

An irrepressible twinkle flickered in Cedric's celtic blue eyes.

"He shall go comfortably to Castle Dare, my lord. But it is as well that I understood the charge in time."

"Remember it, then. Ride on, *madame*."

The short November day darkened to its close. Out of the north came a keen, strong wind, herding the clustered gray clouds across the dull sky and cresting the sullen waves with foam. Here, where England and Scotland merged, the winters were bitterly cold.

As they rode mile after mile into the bleak country, Gabrielle drooped lower in her saddle. Cedric and his men had long since rejoined the party,



their horses panting and curvetting in the sharp air.

At dusk Count Bertrand halted for an instant, unclasping the jeweled buckles of his cloak.

"Your dress is insufficient, *madame*, and you are of the south," he observed, and, stooping, dropped the garment around the girl's slight form.

Gabrielle straightened herself so abruptly that the cloak fell to the ground.

"No! No!" she rebelled passionately. "You stifle me—I cannot bear it. Oh, if I might hope to freeze utterly and die!"

"Cedric, your mistress's cloak."

Cedric was already on foot and presenting the garment with profound deference. Bertrand took it from him and rewrapped the rich fold around the girl.

"Fasten the clasps, *madame*," he advised. "One does not so easily freeze the heart. And beat not with your frail hands against the door that has closed upon you!"

Silently Gabrielle's small fingers clasped the buckles, rough with gems, and the cavalcade moved on.

With Bertrand's cloak of velvet and costly furs falling over her black gown of nunlike severity, she rode across the sounding bridge into the courtyard of Falconmere an hour later.

Up at the huge, grim, stone castle, with towers dark with age, around at the hurrying retainers bearing torches that illuminated paved courts and imprisoning walls, she gazed—then slipped fainting from the saddle.

Cedric sprang forward, Ellena rushed to her mistress, crying out, but quicker than either was Count Bertrand's movement as he caught the pathetic figure.

"Light the way to the east tower," he commanded. "All is prepared as I ordered?"

"Yes, my lord."

To his great strength her weight was so small a thing that he carried her with the caution of one bearing a fragile burden easily crushed. Before

him servants hastened with lights. After him Ellena followed in tremulous persistence and dread.

The whole castle bore witness to a careless profusion and wealth according strangely with the martial strictness of discipline everywhere visible. This was a fortress ready for siege, but a fortress draped like a palace. And nowhere was this luxury more apparent than in the east tower.

The warmth and motion partially awakened Gabrielle, when Bertrand laid her on a couch near a glowing hearth. Sighing, she lay passively among the tumbled brocade coverlets and cushions, her eyes still closed.

Her veil had fallen off in the transit, and the hair that was her richest possession was freed from its bonds. Such hair! Blue-black, silken-fine, it clustered heavily about her forehead and fell in shining masses over her shoulders, trailing its unheeded beauty over the floor and cloaking her in its abundance. Set in all that darkness, her small, white face was spiritual in its purity of tint and expression.

Twice Ellena came forward, to retreat again before Count Bertrand's gesture. But at last Gabrielle herself seemed to feel the steady gaze bent upon her.

She moaned faintly, stirred, and turned her face from the stone-cold, stone-passionless face above her. Then Bertrand stooped.

"*Madame*," he said. "*Madame*, do you hear me?"

Her lashes fluttered and lifted, her dark eyes met his in a terror beyond words, an agony of expectation.

"My servants will bring all things needful. Command what you will of them; this tower is your own. These rooms have but one door of communication with the castle, *madame*. I give you the key to that door." He took her right hand and laid a small object in it.

Her gaze clung to his. Her hand closed.

She hid her face in the pillows, and



the tears came at last. Count Bertrand rose and moved away, but paused to speak to the other woman:

"Those wardrobes against the wall contain the apparel of the past lady, my sister. As soon as possible, your mistress shall have fitting attire—until then make use of this. Burn that black gown she wears! I wish to see it no more."

Ellena curtsied, looking the defiance she dared not voice. Bertrand passed out, and the door closed.

An hour passed in silence. Ellena took the key, unasked, and made fast the door. Discovering the tray of mulled wine, confections and pastries, usually left at the disposal of a guest in a great house, she tried to coax Gabrielle to taste of them. Finding that impossible, she herself ate with the hunger of long-fasting youth, and returned to sit by her half-conscious companion.

The fire leaped and glowed, sending odd quivers across the figures of the deep-hued tapestry. Drowsy with weariness and lulled by the quietness of the girl, who lay face downward on the couch, Ellena's head drooped lower and lower.

Suddenly Gabrielle started to her feet, her cheeks and lips scarlet with fever.

"Braid this up!" she ordered clearly, striving in vain to gather all the rippling masses of her hair into the compass of her two small hands. "Pile it on my head, I say—am I unwed, that you leave it hanging free? My neck is but slender—will it bear the burden, think you?"

"*Mademoiselle, mademoiselle!*" gasped the dismayed maid.

Gabrielle regarded her, recalled from the grasp of delirium by the familiar voice, then looked around the room.

"Why not?" she said in her usual tones. "After all, it is true, Ellena. And I have not died." And, abruptly holding out her left hand: "Take it off—I lack strength. The ring—take it off."

"Why?" Ellena faltered.

"Why? What have I to do with Oscar's betrothal ring, who am his brother's wife? Hush, there is no help; we have a master, you and I."

As on the seashore road, the maid took the mistress into her arms and they wept together.

## CHAPTER II.

### Dick of the Falcons.

"SO last night it was his countess whom my lord brought home, and to-day there will be another arm-chair beside his. Is she fair of face?"

"Yes," said Cedric Armstrong, who sat on a table in the falconry, swinging his handsome spurred and booted legs and watching the ugly little man at work among the birds.

"Truly?" The other's grotesque face twisted in a grimace. "And she was as willing to be wed, they say, as this pretty hawk is to wear hood and jesses! Do you remember how he tore my hand when I first set to tame him?"

"Yes."

Silence for a moment, while the squat, lame falconer went on feeding his charges with bits of raw meat.

"My lady countess will have many a rare chance to tear the hand that tames her if she choose," the little man resumed, peering aside at his companion. "I heard once of a lady in Italy who drove the bodkin from her hair through her lord's eye while he slept. So fine the weapon, so tiny the wound, that no one saw or guessed—yet he died. Or there be ladies who know how to mingle the juice of some dainty herb with wine or food, and death follows to leave them free."

"Yes," assented Cedric dryly; "but my lord has taken a dove. Little she knows of stab or poison who comes from a convent of saintly nuns."

"She was betrothed to Sir Oscar d'Arsy, they say. If Count Bertrand were to die, lady and castle and lands would fall to Sir Oscar and his father



as next of kin. No doubt Oscar would pay richly the one who helped him to that."

The suggestion was bold, the thought implied treason, yet Cedric Armstrong continued to smile and listen, watching the falcons fluttering on their perches.

The limping little man, known as Dick Courte-jambe to the merry household wits, covertly eyed him as one who plays a game with his own destruction. One word of this repeated to Count Bertrand would mean an execution within the hour, as both well knew.

"You have been the count's lieutenant for eight years, Master Armstrong; ever since you were a young dare-all of twenty-two, and he—"

"He is thirty-four now," supplied Cedric Armstrong.

"A long service and a hard one, at home and abroad."

"I know none better," said the soldier carelessly. "You are overfeeding the brown eyas, man!"

Dick's ugly, intelligent face quivered with eagerness and doubt. Sharply he scrutinized the other man, itching to speak, yet holding his tongue bridled by fear. Cedric remained silent, his blue eyes fixed on the floor.

"Master Cedric! Master Cedric!" shrilled a boy's voice at the door. "My lord demands him."

The pert, teasing face of Bertrand's page, Marcel Taillefer, appeared in the opening.

"Aha, I have the nicked bull's-eye—he is here! My lord is in haste, good Cedric."

Cedric rose idly.

"So? I fly, then. Look to your pets, Dick; they have sharp talons. *That*, jackanapes"—he caught the grinning page a hearty box on the ear in passing—"that to help you remember my first name is not for your use."

The boy ducked away, laughing and nursing his head.

"Oof, what a hand! My ears are ringing vespers! I will remember—when you can reach me—Master Arm-

strong. Now I bethink me that red hair spells temper."

"Mind the red flag, then," smiled Cedric, going down the corridor with his swinging stride.

Count Bertrand received his lieutenant in his suite of private rooms, where he sat behind a broad table littered with papers and sketched maps. He had the usual report of the night to hear, the usual directions for the day to give; after which he sat musing.

"You will have special vigilance over the sentinels at night, Cedric. It is possible that yesterday's event may bring an attack from Castle Dare."

"Again, my lord!"

Bertrand glanced up and smiled significantly.

"In fact, the baron's forces have suffered each time," he recalled. "And I doubt if Castle Dare has strength to try again. Yet the provocation is great. Watch the sentries, Cedric."

"Yes, my lord."

"You will go now to the east tower and inform the countess that I am about to have the honor of visiting her."

Cedric saluted and withdrew. He, of course, did not ask why he was sent upon an errand better fitting the page Marcel; nor did Bertrand choose to explain that he seriously doubted Gabrielle's opening her door to any one, and that he would permit no one but his favorite Cedric to witness such a defiance.

It was Ellena who came to the door of the east tower and received the message.

"I will tell my lady," she answered sharply.

Cedric placed his shoulders against the door about to be closed upon him, his blue eyes approving the girl with a certain sympathy.

"Talk to me first," he advised good-humoredly. "Nay—fly not! There are pretty faces enough I can kiss with a welcome without robbing yours, mistress. I have a word for your ear."



"And I a hand for yours," snapped the girl. "What word? Few enough will we hear in this den of brigands!" "Nay, that is it," answered Cedric more soberly. "You have heard Count Bertrand called harsh of rule—he is not, unless thwarted. Oh, I grant you he is no girl! But cross him not and you may rest. I tell you that your lady mistress is no more different from a starved peasant working in the fields than my lord is different from these raw border nobles of the country." A moment he sent his eyes from her, then back.

"I could tell you tales of strange, bright lands and courts where he sits beside an emperor who would hold all England as a mere bare province not worth the winning. I have seen that which few men have seen—I know! You love your mistress, and you are brave as a man-at-arms for her—for that I warn you. My lord can be just and generous; but cross him not as you value peace."

Awed in spite of herself, she stared at him for an instant.

"Take your back from the door so I may close it, and I may believe you," she retorted. "And I will bring you my lady's answer."

Cedric promptly complied and laughed in her disconcerted face.

"Well?" Count Bertrand demanded when his lieutenant returned.

He believed he knew the reply before it was given and was prepared for defiance. It mattered little. Since his eighteenth year, when he had escaped his father's control and maintained, by force of arms, his right to his mother's domain of Falconmere, no one had successfully defied Bertrand d'Arsy.

"My lady, the countess, prays my lord to delay his visit for an hour until she be prepared to receive him."

"You saw *madame*?"

"My lord, she sent reply through her waiting-woman."

"Good. That is all."

But Cedric waited, and, tacitly receiving permission to speak, he came

nearer to the table, pushing back the insignia-embroidered sleeve from his right arm.

"My lord, I gained this the night of the first attack upon the castle." He laid his finger upon an ugly scar running up his wrist. "It goes to the shoulder."

"True."

He touched a white mark just under the auburn curls on his forehead.

"This was where a dagger-thrust caught me the day the ambush burst upon us from the forest road. This in my left palm was set by Sir Oscar's rapier."

Bertrand leaned back, becoming interested.

"What of it? Have you need to recall your wounds to me, Cedric?"

"One more, my lord. Over my heart is the trace of the stab received when you and I fought alone against six—and won. I am remembering how, last year, when Arnaut was proved a traitor to you, you spoke but two words: 'Hang him.' An hour after he was accused his body was hanging from a rampart."

"Well?"

Cedric drew a step nearer.

"My lord, I have served you as best I could. I would ask your promise that if ever I am so accused you will hear me in private and give me a little time—not order me to execution within the hour."

"Why do you ask that?"

"I scarcely know, yet, my lord—I guess and doubt. Grant me to keep silence still a while."

Bertrand nodded quietly.

"I give the promise, Cedric. You had no need to ask it; you are not an Arnaut."

He put out his hand, as Cedric retired, and turned an hour-glass that stood upon the table. In all the north of England there could scarcely have been found another such toy of crystal and ivory inlaid with gold. It was no more English than the beautiful manuscripts that lay near it, whose Greek



characters Count Bertrand read easily, though many gentlemen who called themselves his peers found trouble in reading their native language.

When the last grain of glittering sand had added itself to the pile in the lower crystal he rose and went to visit his wife.

His knock on the door of the east tower was answered at once. Ellena opened, curtsied respectfully, and stood aside. Bertrand's acute eyes noted that her dress was neatly arranged and her hair smooth, and he felt an impulse of respect for antagonists not hysterical.

He approved the good sense that prevented Gabrielle from a childish attempt to bar him out. But even so, he was not prepared for what he saw on entering.

Gabrielle de Foulke had grown to womanhood in a bare, poor convent in Normandy. The plain, black dress of the day before had represented the dress of all her life. Because she had a reason for obedience, she had let Ellena clothe her as Count Bertrand had bidden, but she blushed pitifully and in sharp distress as he stopped, gazing at her.

The ladies of Falconmere had possessed magnificent tastes. Gabrielle stood in the center of the room robed in flowing crimson velvet. Open sleeves left her soft, fair arms bare to the shoulder; around the square-cut neck she had drawn a lace scarf, but above its folds her white throat rose in unveiled beauty.

Upon her small head her dark hair was piled in soft clusters and wound in heavy braids; the hands hanging clasped before her were without any jewel except the ring Bertrand had taken from his own finger to wed her with the previous day. As he advanced a step, she sank in a profound curtsy.

The pathetic dignity of the action, the appeal of submission in her dress and the open door, her heaving breast and extreme pallor, could not have

failed to touch the hardest. Count Bertrand took her hand and led her back to her chair, himself taking the seat opposite.

"You have no cause for fear of me, *madame*," he said. "You have freely admitted me as your guest, and as such I will presently go from here. Let us speak together calmly, since we have to arrange a lifetime."

However cold, the words were not unkind.

With an effort Gabrielle controlled the nervous tremors that shook her and ventured to fix her velvet-black eyes upon the stately stranger who was her husband.

"After yesterday I am not so mad," she began, but her voice failed.

"So mad?"

"As to try to defy you. There is no one to help me—I am an orphan and alone—"

She would not let the tears come before him. He saw their brightness rise across her gaze and her delicate lips quiver and compress, but her pride conquered. Looking at her, for the first time in his wilful life, Bertrand of Falconmere admitted that he had done an evil thing.

"It is your misfortune to have been thrown between two warring parties," he said gravely. "It does not matter now whose cause is just, or who had the greater wrong. You innocently suffer from the passions of those stronger, *madame*. I took you from my brother as I would have taken any possession he prized. You find that cruel? If I am what I am, it is my kinsmen who sowed what they—and you—reap."

"Does wrong excuse wrong?" she flashed out of her despair.

"No, but it breeds it," he made dry retort.

"Then do me no more! My lord, you have neither hate nor love for me—it is nothing to you that I am in your house, except that it hurts others—is it not so? I have understood?"

"It is so," he answered. "Only since



I have taken a wife she must maintain that dignity."

She leaned forward, one hand over her heart, the other flung out in earnest appeal.

"Ah, then give me peace," she pleaded. "I know there is no help for me, not ever again. You said it last night: a door has closed behind me. I am your wife. Oh, I should have refused that—I should have struggled, cried no to that good priest! I was afraid! I was a coward yesterday."

"You were wise, *madame*."

"You meant—that—threat?"

"I never yet threatened what I would not perform. Yet, perhaps, I would not have made that menace if I had not known you would yield."

She shuddered, a streak of scarlet staining her pallor. Count Bertrand watched her meditatively with a certain wonder.

When he had gone to possess himself of his brother's promised wife he imagined no such captive as this white girl, pure from her convent. He fancied he knew Oscar's taste, and had expected some handsome, red-cheeked fury.

He recalled how once in his boyhood he had set a wolf-trap, and going next day to find the fierce creature, encountered instead the soft, dark eyes of a little fawn. He had set the fawn free—he could not free this captive.

"It is too late, now," Gabrielle resumed, her low voice hurried and very desolate. "There is no one of whom I can honorably ask so much as a roof's shelter, my lord, except you. If I went to Castle Dare now I would sin against God. Since it is so, let me live here as your sister might, and I will try to do my part as she would. I will dress as you desire—I will be before your household all you ask. Oh, I know I should hate you—perhaps I do—but I am too weak to be your enemy! Indeed, I will do as you bid, if only Ellena and I may stay here alone. My lord, you love me not—grant me this."

"*Madame, madame!*" exclaimed Bertrand, and, abruptly rising, he turned from her to one of the deep-set windows.

She made no further movement or plea; sitting in her splendor of crimson fabric and gold, with that tragedy of helplessness in her white face and large eyes.

When Bertrand came back there was little change in his expression; he was too long trained to self-control.

"*Madame*, if you had spoken so to me yesterday you might have swerved me from a purpose for the first time in my memory," he said very quietly. "I know little of such women as you; I cannot remember my mother, and my sister died when I was fifteen. I have lived with men and fought with men. You say rightly that you are too weak to be my enemy. I can agree with Father Christopher; there should be a reckoning for this when I die—if they keep scores out there. But I accept your offer, and give my word to it. You have no cause to fear me, now or ever."

"I thank you," she faltered, and covered her face, tears coming with relief.

He stood looking down at her; at her bent head with its weight of lustrous hair, the daintily, useless hands and frail figure.

"Give me the key to the door," he requested finally.

She drew the key from her bosom and offered it to him. There was surprise in her glance, but no distrust, and the confidence in his word touched home emotions he had thought dead.

Almost gently he took the key, and through the ring holding it clasped a second key.

"Last night I gave you the means to bar yourself in," he said. "Now I add the opposite gift: there is nowhere in the castle you may not go, as I go. Trust for trust; you are not my prisoner, but my wife."

He gave her the keys and went out. Ellena, opening the door for her



master, was very heartily grateful to that master's lieutenant as she watched the tall figure move away.

As Count Bertrand passed down the corridor, a squat, uncouth shape caught his attention, cowering in the shadows.

"You, Dick?" he identified his falconer. "What brings you to this part of the castle? I do not love to find my men out of place."

The little man crept from his corner.

"My lord, pardon," he apologized glibly. "I would fain win favor, being a poor cripple, so planned to offer the lady countess an humble service. Doubtless she will hawk and hunt, like all noble ladies, and I would offer to train a young eyas for her—a sweet bird and gentle!"

Bertrand eyed him keenly, then shrugged his shoulders.

"You are officious," he gave judgment. "But consult the countess's woman, if you choose."

Dick stepped back, bowing abject thanks. But as the famous noble passed from sight, the little falconer raised himself on his toes, and peering after him, executed a weird, wizard-like dance of mockery and derision, twisting his face into grimaces of triumph.

Ellena was closing the door of the tower when Dick thrust himself into the opening and ran past her to cringe in exaggerated salute before Gabrielle.

"Noble lady, I am Dick—poor Dick o' the falcons—honest Dick," he fawned, his beady, reptilian eyes seeking the young girl's limpid gaze. "Kind Dick, who feels for a lovely lady wronged by the evil count! Shall Dick help you escape, lady—help you flee to good Sir Oscar?"

Startled, recoiling instinctively, Gabrielle rose.

"It is too late," she said wonderingly. "Who sent you to me—Oscar?"

He nodded in a fury of excitement, grasping the hem of her robe in his eagerness.

"He knows—Oscar knows! Too late? Aye, but not if Lucifer were dead. If you were a widow, lady, free, rich! Poor Dick knows—he might fall sick. Shall I help you, lady? Shall I?"

Dumb, she looked at him as she might have looked at some nightmare horror, her small fingers grasping at the cross she wore above her heart.

"You are new to the thought, lady," he urged, his words tripping in their haste. "You will come to it; you will think of Sir Oscar who waits for you! It is easy—so easy! There be sweet meats too rich for wholesomeness—bodkins that scratch."

"Go!" she articulated. "Go!"

"But I will come again. Lady, I will come again."

"Never come. Never! Oh, I shall go mad in this place! Go, or I will call!"

"Lady, if you tell of this I shall die," he panted, terrified in his turn. "I wanted to help you—only to help you!"

"I will not speak. Only go!"

At her cry, Ellena had sprung across the room. As Gabrielle turned to her the little falconer scurried out of the place. There was no defeat in his face, and in the corridor he stopped to repeat his exultant dance. But this time he did not look after Count Bertrand, but at Gabrielle's closed door.

## CHAPTER III.

### Lily and Swords.

CLEAR and sweet and silver-clear the notes of a horn pierced the frosty, noon air. The horses of the party halted opposite Falconer's pranced and chafed, pawing the frozen ground.

Out on the wall above stepped Cedric Armstrong, gorgeous in Count Bertrand's colors of green and silver, with the ominous glint of steel, and upon his arm the badge of the house—a stooping falcon argent upon a field.



vert, and the motto in old French: "I strike once."

"Who summons Falconmere?" he challenged loudly.

"A messenger from the right noble Baron d'Arsy, under flag of truce," the answer was shouted.

"Desiring to enter?"

"Desiring speech with the Count Bertrand of Falconmere."

Cedric retired to report. Presently the drawbridge fell with a grinding of chains and massive beams, the huge gates opened, and the visitors rode into the courtyard they had so often and so vainly battled to enter by force.

Cedric advanced to meet the leader, but stopped short at sight of him, staring. Stare for stare the other arrogantly gave him.

"Well, Armstrong, have you never seen me before?" he demanded, his thin lip sneering. "Or did you never look to see me here? Rouse yourself, man!"

A deep flush burned through the lieutenant's ruddy tan, as if he found some insult in the speech not expressed in the words. Murmuring an excuse, he led the way within.

There was not in all war-impoorished England at this time another hall like the one where Count Bertrand waited for his guests. The huge room strewn with strange furs and Eastern carpets, ruddy with firelight from two great hearths whose glow reflected from tinted silks and rare weapons suspended against the walls, from settees and tables of polished woods and vessels of precious metals, offered a dazzling interior to unaccustomed eyes.

The men-at-arms halted near the entrance. Attended by Cedric, the leader came forward to the velvet-covered seats at the upper end of the room, where was placed Count Bertrand's armchair with a vacant chair beside it.

"A reception truly royal, brother," the visitor greeted, his sharp eyes edged with bitter hate and envy. "Well have your pirate voyages feathered

Scarcely less amazed than Cedric had been, Bertrand recognized his brother.

"My house is as you see it," he answered, never more calmly. "It may be my wealth is as honestly gained as Castle Dare's poverty. Cedric, advance a chair for Sir Oscar d'Arsy."

"I will not sit or rest under this roof until you are dead and I step into your inheritance," Oscar retorted savagely. "Bertrand d'Arsy, where is my wife?"

"I did not know that you had ever married."

"You know well that I mean the Lady Gabrielle."

"Ah! Then you mean where is *my* wife."

Their glances crossed, deadly as the crossing of swords. Oscar d'Arsy was smaller than his brother and without his imposing presence, yet handsome and dangerous enough after another fashion.

"Giles told me the truth, then, before I had him and the cowards with him hung!" he snarled. "You have her—you!"

"Did you doubt it?" asked Bertrand.

Oscar made a violent gesture.

"After the message you sent, no. You, who have been our curse—who have wrenched from us possession after possession—you fittingly snatch this! If I could strangle you—feel you die under my hands—"

Bertrand smiled with meaning contempt.

"Aye, you are beyond that, too," the other admitted. "No man in the countryside can stand against you. But my day will come though the devil plays for you! I tell you I am sick with hate of you, and you shall feel it yet. You—"

Count Bertrand leaned back, playing with a jeweled pendant at his breast.

"Did you come to tell me this, Oscar?"

"No. Where is Gabrielle?"

"My wife?"



"I do not believe it!" he cried.

"I am different from the rest of my family, dear Oscar: I do not lie."

"She would not consent—she loved me."

Bertrand's slight, chill smile curved his lip.

"Am I so gentle to defy, or is she so strong, brother?"

"She—"

"She has been my wife for two days."

Oscar turned aside, his face writhing with struggling passions, his fingers closing and unclosing about the hilt of his sword.

Cedric Armstrong glanced uneasily from him to where the Castle Dare men waited at the end of the hall, but contented himself with the knowledge that Falconmere's forces were within call, and maintained his attitude of impassive readiness.

"Let me see her," Oscar demanded, turning back, half suffocated by fury and despair. "Take me to whatever prison you keep her in, or bring her here! Let me learn from her whether you speak the truth."

Bertrand hesitated.

"You refuse? You dare not consent! Oh, crushed and broken as she must be, tortured by your un pitying cruelty—even you are ashamed to produce her before these witnesses. And I stand here and cannot kill you!"

"Cedric, salute the countess from me and ask her to accept your attendance here," Bertrand commanded. "Acquaint her that I have a guest."

Cedric met his chief's glance comprehendingly, knowing that he was to prepare Gabrielle for the guest's identity. And being sorely unused to ladies of rank, although ready enough to coquet with the country girls far and near, he withdrew in some dismay.

"If I speak to her softly, likely she will weep and refuse to come," he reflected gloomily. "If I speak to her roughly my lord will wring my neck. Beelzebub, fly away with all women, gentle and simple!"

The two men in the hall waited silently for a space. Oscar gnawed his blond mustache in bitter impatience, standing upright and rigid. Bertrand sat pensive, his gaze on the other. But at last the pause grew too tense.

"My loving father is in health?" the host asked, his irony very cold.

"You do well to ask that, who have striven a score of times to slay him," was the sullen retort.

"Let us be accurate, Sir Oscar. I might have slain him a score of times in the attacks you two have made upon me, but I have passed him by. We have done each other much harm, but his life I never sought."

"You strike deeper—at his happiness."

"I remember my sister, Adela, who died," quietly returned Count Bertrand.

All dark thoughts met in their meeting glances. The breath of both came a trifle faster.

"Adela was—" Oscar began sneeringly.

A door at the side of the hall swung open, held back by the page, Marcel. Preceded by the bareheaded Cedric followed by Ellena and the two English maids procured since her arrival, Gabrielle of Falconmere walked slowly across the room.

Her lashes lying in a dark fringe upon her colorless cheeks, she moved noiselessly in her trailing robes past Oscar, who drew back like one dazed to give her passage, and went on to curtsy deeply to her husband; then slowly turned and sank in a second curtsy to the guest.

Count Bertrand, who had risen to receive her, ceremoniously took her frost-cold hand and seated her in the chair beside his own.

"You wished to see my wife, brother," he said. "Look!"

From one to the other Oscar looked. Instead of a weeping, desperate captive in sober black, he saw this girl in splendid attire; her beautiful hair banded with gold and gems, her hair



tiful arms clasped from wrist to shoulder with jeweled bracelets, the very cross at her breast studded with rubies.

"Gabrielle!" he cried. "Gabrielle!"

She shivered from head to foot, lying in the cushioned chair, but did not answer.

"Gabrielle!" he cried again. "Lady, lady, speak, or I shall believe what a moment since I would have called a lie from any man! You went with him?"

"I was taken," she responded, her silver voice heavy with despair. "Go from here, Sir Oscar—Gabrielle de Foulke died three days ago."

"You are his wife?"

"I am his wife," her dull tones answered.

Oscar struck his hand against his sword-hilt so that every one in the hall started to the clash of steel.

"And I was not there! Bertrand, Bertrand, by heaven and hell, by fair means or foul, I will kill you for this! I will live with the beasts of the forest; I will learn withcraft from the old hags of the countryside; sell my life and soul to compass your death. By any means—"

He broke the sentence short in the full tide of rage, his eyes falling on Cedric Armstrong. The break and the glance were so marked as to draw all attention that way. Cedric himself, looking up to meet that fixed stare, flushed heavily; then paled as he had never done in camp or field—paled until his very lips were drained of color.

It lasted the merest instant. Almost at once Oscar brought his eyes back to his brother and concluded:

"Remember it—remember!"

"When you can, keep your word," answered Bertrand, unmoved. "Cedric, go have the gates opened; Sir Oscar is going."

"I will keep it," promised Oscar. "And I will take my own. Gabrielle, this is no marriage; rise and come with me."

"It would be sin," she denied hopelessly, not lifting her head from where it rested against the high back of the chair. "I cannot fall so low. As you pity me, go from here in peace and forget me, a coward."

"You did love me! Gabrielle, Gabrielle, you loved me when I wooed you in the convent garden in your Normandy—have you forgotten me for this man?"

She turned her head then, her great black eyes sending him an anguish and reproach beyond speech. Of the two men, Bertrand best comprehended her suffering.

"You do love me still!" Oscar urged. "Oh, then, give me that triumph and so punish this man's pride—say it; say it!"

"My house is old; and its honor stands high," she said with the strength found in frailness. "I cannot say it—I am a wife."

"No; no wife!" he denied vehemently, springing forward. "I love you, I claim you. Gabrielle—"

Blind with excitement, already he had set foot on the dais, when Count Bertrand stepped between, and, placing his open palm against the other's breast, sent him reeling back.

"No farther," he warned sternly. "I have answered your questions; I have brought my wife for you to look upon; I have let you woo her before my eyes—now we end. You have her reply and mine; now go!"

Oscar half drew his sword, poising as if to fling himself upon his enemy, but prudence choked back that impulse to suggest one less honorable. He wheeled toward the group of his followers gathered at the end of the hall, admitted there through Bertrand's confidence in their pledge of truce.

"To me!" he shouted savagely. "Up—kill me this man."

Bertrand's sword flashed from its sheath as his enemy's men rushed in the treacherous attack. Cedric Armstrong had left to carry out the order given, and the master of Falconmere's



own careless courage had left him alone in his own hall.

Oscar leaped back from the glittering death in Lucifer's hand, refusing the offered duel, and the pack closed in, brave in numbers.

Gabrielle's scream, mingled with Marcel Taillefer's shout, as the first two men went down before Bertrand's steel.

"Ha, Falconmere! To the rescue!" cried the fearless page, catching Gabrielle from her chair and swinging her to the back of the dais before snatching his dagger from its scabbard.

Straight to Bertrand's side he bounded, his boyish eyes shining with the lust of battle as yet untried. His jeweled toy-weapon sank home in the throat of a fellow who had crept upon the count from behind.

"Falconmere!" he shouted again.

With a crash the doors flew apart, and raging Falconmere answered the alarm, pouring in to rescue its lord. As Oscar's men had overwhelmed Bertrand, so now they were overwhelmed in their turn. The beautiful hall ran red.

"Enough!" Bertrand's powerful voice rang command. "Give quarter."

The order came late. Of the twenty men who had followed Oscar D'Artsy into the castle, three remained erect, and they were wounded. The attempt had been swiftly over and deadly in its failure.

Oscar alone had escaped, and sullenly faced his brother across the space strewn with his stricken men. Gabrielle and her women were huddled together on the dais, and before them stood Bertrand and Marcel Taillefer.

The silence that ensued was tense with expectation. Bertrand ended it, his cold voice unmoved as always.

"Sir Oscar, lend me that rag you wear across your shoulder."

The "rag" was a scarf, richly embroidered with the D'Artsy coat of arms. Dazed by a demand so unex-

pected, Oscar mechanically drew off the silk. Cedric Armstrong, lately arrived and grim of brow, took it from him and delivered it to the master.

Very deliberately Count Bertrand wiped his dripping sword upon the scarf before sheathing it, then tossed the dishonored cloth to its owner.

"Take it for a remembrance of your men, brother," he advised with biting irony. "For those before us are dead or dying, and I shall hang those living who broke their pact of truce to try assassination on my hearth and before my wife. You I will neither hang nor keep—will you fight me for Falconmere and the lady, or shall I have you thrust from my doors?"

Choking with shame and fury, Oscar battled with himself, grinding his teeth. He knew Bertrand—knew the duel must and would end in his own death.

"I have no chance," he snarled viciously; "but my time will come!"

And turning his back he strode to the door without other leave-taking. At a gesture from Bertrand, Cedric went with him to accomplish his departure from the castle.

Marcel Taillefer, all the page again, had gone to aid Gabrielle. Leaning on the boy's arm, she faced her husband, keeping her eyes averted from the hall battle had made hideous.

"Let me go to my tower," she asked faintly. "I am ill, ill!"

Down from his lofty height Count Bertrand gazed at her, his gray eyes clear and cool, his color unchanged by the danger past.

"A silver sword sheathed in a white lily is your spirit in you," he answered. "You have bravely kept my honor and yours, *madame*. There is nothing in my castle that you may not ask. Marcel, you will return to me; you have proved your place among men. Enquire you are, and page no longer."

The boy flushed with pride and pleasure. Gabrielle lifted her hand from his arm, taking Ellena's instead, and left the hall with her women.



In the corridor the young girl's artificial strength gave way. With a moan of utter grief and horror Gabrielle sank against the wall.

"Ellena, Ellena; he is gone! Let me rest here a moment. Gone, and I could not tell him I loved him—can never tell him! He fought for me. Oh, Oscar, Oscar, Oscar!"

She covered her face, and the tears trickled through her slender fingers. Weeping also, Ellena caressed and supported her, murmuring broken words of consolation, while the two English maids looked on, stolid and uncomprehending.

The little man who stealthily approached them was unnoticed until he spoke.

"Wo, my lady; wo indeed to lose so fair and true a lover!" said his thin, harsh tones. "Different, indeed, is he from grim Count Bertrand. Do you weep only, lady? Some, so wronged, have done more."

With an exclamation Gabrielle looked up, shrinking closer to Ellena.

"It is only Dick—poor Dick, the cripple. Wo it is to poor Dick to see such grief as yours, lady; yet worse is Sir Oscar's!"

"What do you want of me?" she questioned in agitated repugnance.

"Only to speak an humble word of comfort. Ah, lady, your one hope now is that our dread lord should die! Then what freedom—you would be mistress of this noble castle and able to give it to Sir Oscar. But Lucifer will not die—alone."

"Leave me! Ellena, bid him go. Why do you say such things? Why do you follow me?"

He crept boldly nearer as she retreated.

"I am only poor Dick of the falcons; honest Dick! But think of Sir Oscar riding away. Think how his light eyes shine with love and grief. How he would rule here in the master's seat, lady; how he would hold you to his heart!"

"Go, go!" Gabrielle cried desper-

ately. "Sainte Marie, what world is this? Go from me, sir!"

The door to the great hall abruptly reopened and Count Bertrand appeared on the threshold.

"Your voice, *madame!*" he exclaimed, sweeping the group with his keen glance. "So, Dick? *Madame*, if this fellow has offended you—"

"I was afraid," she panted, still gazing with horror at the little falconer who crouched before her in an attitude of exaggerated respect.

"If he is at fault he shall be hung. I will not have these scenes when you pass through my house."

Dick gave a gurgling cry of abject terror; he knew the menace no idle one.

"Lady—lady—" he implored, clutching at her robes.

Scarcely less dismayed, Gabrielle recoiled before this iron justice. Even though she knew the cripple to be more guilty than Bertrand dreamed, she could not sentence him to death.

"No, no," she protested. "He came upon me suddenly—I was giddy and easily frightened. It was nothing, my lord."

Bertrand readily conceived the lame, misshapen man, now greenishly pallid with fear, a figure to startle the timid, delicate Gabrielle. His brow relaxed.

"You may go," he granted curt permission to the culprit. "And no part of your duty takes you to these places. I found you once before on the way to the countess's rooms; the next time I find you in her path I will have you whipped. *Madame*, you are still shaken; lean on my arm."

In fact, the emotions of the last hour had left Gabrielle scarcely able to stand. She shivered at Bertrand's touch, but passively suffered his support.

As he left her at the entrance to the east tower the distant grinding of the drawbridge announced Oscar's departure.

But Dick gathered himself up and fled out to where Cedric Armstrong stood in the courtyard.



"Did Oscar speak to you? Did he speak?" he asked, mumbling the words in his rage and haste as he gripped the lieutenant's arm. "Did he?"

Cedric looked down at the clawlike hand grasping his sleeve just below where Count Bertrand's badge shone on the green satin.

"Yes, he spoke to me," he answered.

Dick peered feverishly into the other's pale face, then pointed, spying a new evidence.

"The ring? Oscar gave you the ring?"

Cedric dragged off the diamond and dropped it at his feet.

"He gave it to me beneath the eyes of my own men, yes," he flared. "As he looked treason at me beneath the eyes of my lord! If I live through a week it will not be thanks to Oscar or you. Keep out of my sight for a while; I am sick of plots."

Chuckling, Dick fell on his knees and commenced to search for the ring over the rough pavement.

"You and I and *madame*," he nodded gleefully. "You and I and *madame*?"

"*Madame*?" Cedric uttered, catching the falconer's shoulder. "*Madame*?"

"You and I and *madame*," he nodded. "Shall you see Sir Oscar to-night—shall you?"

## CHAPTER IV.

### The Queen's Word.

THE day after Sir Oscar's visit to Falconmere, Cedric Armstrong went to the east tower in search of Ellena.

"I bring a message for the countess," he stated to the girl.

"From your lord, of course," she said, with more sharpness than she felt, eying aslant his soldierly good looks and tossing her blond head.

"No," contradicted Cedric very shortly.

Her eyes widening, she stared at the seal on the letter he gave.

"From—Sir Oscar?" she whispered.

"Yes."

Amazed, she turned the missive in her fingers, doubting her senses.

"But—you bring it, Master Armstrong? You? Why, if Lord Bertrand knew, he would punish—"

"He would," grimly assured Cedric, his face lighting with an eager, oddly like hope. "Will you—will *madame* tell him, mistress?"

"Never in this life," snapped Ellena. "Do you think us fools?"

The light died from the lieutenant's expression, leaving dejection rather than gratitude.

"There be worse than fools," he muttered ungallantly, turning on his heel.

Ellena ran after him.

"Should my lady wish, might you send an answer?" she questioned. "A good friend have you been to us!"

Cedric whirled on her, his blue eyes blazing.

"That, no!" he stormed. "Saturn carry home all petticoats! Will you ask me to purvey my lord's dinner? No!"

And he left her standing there, all amazed.

The note was brief; it simply bade Gabrielle be patient, for her lover worked secretly for her deliverance.

The Countess of Falconmere blushed and trembled while she read, then dropped the letter in the fire.

"Bid Master Armstrong bring me no more," she told her maid, "for I have no right to receive them, nor he to carry. Though he hates me, I would not be the cause of his coming to harm from his master."

"Hates you, *madame*?" cried Ellena, scandalized. "Why?"

"I do not know," said Gabrielle simply. "I see it in his glance."

Indeed, in the days that followed the word passed through Falconmere that Master Armstrong was jealous.



## LUCIFER'S WIFE.

Marcel laughed at it over his sports, the men-at-arms smiled the news to one another in their quarters, the castle servants tittered the jest. Master Armstrong was jealous of the Countess Gabrielle. When she was with the count, Cedric invariably hovered near. In the great hall, during their occasional rides, whenever possible he watched the two untiringly.

The amused household whispered that he chafed because he could not accompany the count on his daily visit to the east tower.

No one else in the castle disliked the gentle Gabrielle. Into this new life she slipped very quietly; going to the chapel where Father Christopher held services; spending long hours in teaching her maids intricate embroidery, or pacing up and down the balcony encircling the tower, wrapped in her furs.

Sometimes she rode out with Bertrand, whose cold kindness never changed to her, and whom she obeyed, as did every one else in his domain.

But her patient and harmless life never moved Cedric's hard watchfulness of her. His bearing was faultlessly respectful—Count Bertrand would have insured that—but his eyes followed her in a scrutiny wholly unfriendly. And he neglected his work to attend his chief every possible hour, until he drew down upon himself Bertrand's sharp rebuke.

"Go care for your duties, man! Do I keep you for my lieutenant and master of my household, or for a lackey to stand behind my chair? Is there no one else in the castle to hand me a cloak or open a door? Look to your men; they grow lax and idle."

Cedric obeyed so far as to tighten his grasp on the reins of government, yet none the less was with Bertrand at all hours.

So matters stood when the letter from London was brought in, borne by a weary messenger, who had ridden hard for many days.

Marcel Taillefer took the sealed and silk-wrapped packet to Count Ber-

trand, and stood by while he read, waiting to prefer a request for a day's hunting. But what he saw in his chief's expression held him silent.

There were several sheets. When the last was reached Bertrand rest his chin in his hand and gazed long at the hearth piled with blazing logs. So, in repose, his face was cold and grave rather than cruel; but once he smiled, and then one timid might well have recoiled from him.

When he arose his glance fell on the boy.

"Marcel, you are a gentleman," he said abruptly. "Your father was my friend and left you to me as a trust. Have I kept it to you?"

The water sprang to the boy's eyes; with the impulsiveness of his sixteen years he caught Bertrand's hand and touched his lips to it.

"You have been my father, sir," he exclaimed. "Oh, if I have my gentle blood I have nothing else. I have no home but yours, no kin but you—I would die for you, sir!"

"I think you have already tried that," said Bertrand. "But I have loved you, Marcel, and you are young to die. Remember that if I send you from here."

"There is danger?"

"There may be."

"Then," said Marcel magnificently, "I refuse to go."

Bertrand smiled and went to the east tower.

One of the English maids admitted him to the room where Gabrielle and her women sat at their embroidery frames. The scene was pretty, but it dissolved at the count's entrance, Gabrielle rising to curtsy with her graceful ceremony, and the others rising with her.

"Madame, I have to talk with you of some matters," he told her. "Pray send your women from us."

Surprised, Gabrielle complied, signaling the maids to retire to the room beyond. She had long ceased to fear violence from this stately master. She



looked at him now in wondering expectation.

Bertrand did not explain in words. After a moment he separated two sheets from the letter in his hand and gave them to her.

"Read: you may be concerned," he said dryly.

She took them, astonished, and unfolded the first sheet, which was the second of the letter, and commenced abruptly:

So for that we were gai comrades ten years past, in London and over seas, I would fain warn you, Falconmere.

Your brother Oscar came before the queen with this fine tale yestere'en. He swears that you took the lady by force of arm and counter to her prayer, she piteously crying out before all men, and that you by grievous menaces and blows constrained her to wed you.

He swears also that he visited your castle and viewed with his own eyes the misery and shame with which she is used by you, so that there is no lady in England so wretched. I know naught of these charges, Falconmere, save that the Bertrand d'Artsy of my day was a very devil when wroth or wronged, but laid no harm on woman or child. Nor I never knew Oscar d'Artsy to tell truth if a lie would serve.

Yet he has touched the fiery queen, she being French like this lady, and she frets because the king is ill and cannot deal with you. So she sends this envoy to study what you do, and make report of it.

If Oscar speaks sooth, it is a wild life you lead, and this a black deed. He fought hard against the sending of this envoy, asking a force to join his and bring you a prisoner to London Tower for chastisement.

But soldiers are scarce, and the court troubled. The envoy will be on the heels of this letter, which I beseech you to burn. He is Sir John Harcourt, a kindly old man. His charge is to bring back the lady, if all be as bad as told, and lay you under attainder of treason an' you resist.

It is a tight glove for your temper to draw on, Falconmere, I know! But Oscar vows you keep the lady like a serf, and shows a letter she wrote him, imploring him for aid—

The letter fell from Gabrielle's hands as she hid her eyes.

"I never did!" she cried. "My lord, I never saw Sir Oscar except in

your presence. He wrote to me—I never did to him. How could he say it? How could he?"

"I know you did not, madame," said Bertrand tranquilly.

She raised her head, still scarlet with distress.

"You know? How?"

"How? As I know a moonbeam will not blacken what it falls upon, I have watched you, madame, and I know my brother."

"What he says of us is not true." He smiled in sudden scorn.

"The man who entered my castle under a flag of truce, then strove to murder me in return for my confidence; the man who refused to fight me hand to hand, but cried on his followers to cut me down by numbers, would scarcely balk at a lie. You, madame"—the gray eyes he bent on her—were crossed by a flash like white flame—"you, whose honor is so strict, so lofty—you love that shameless cur! Ha, you are the dupe of a dream!"

"My lord!" she protested, white and red battling in her cheeks, "if he sinned, it was for me."

Blighting contempt flared through his composure.

"For you? He was old in sin before you were born, madame. See the man that is, not the one you fancy."

"At least, you—" she retorted with heaving breast, and stopped.

"I have no right to reproach him," he finished for her. "Lady, Bertrand d'Artsy may have given himself to Lucifer, but even the devil would refuse his hand to Oscar d'Artsy."

The convent-bred girl shrank, appalled. Yet some quality in his voice carried truth, and shook her to the core. She sank back in her chair, and there was a silence.

"You come to dictate what I shall say to this envoy?" she asked at last.

"No," he answered.

"No?" she marveled, astounded.

"No. Tell Sir John Harcourt what you choose. I ask no woman's aid. Falconmere stands or falls alone."



She touched the letter in her lap.  
 "Then, why show me this, my lord?"

"Because it was my whim," he answered coldly. "What you tell him I neither dictate nor seek to know. Consider Oscar's tale, if you will; some of it is true."

She regarded him strangely, then picked up the fallen sheet and read the few remaining lines.

"Now I pass to another matter. But I warn you to do no madness of rebellion. You might win at first—in the end it would be the scaffold. Even Bertrand de Falconer cannot fight broad England."

Gabrielle held out the letter, her breathing quickened.

"I am free to act?" she asked.

Bertrand took the sheets from her, and crossing to the hearth, he dropped them into the flames together with the paper he had not shown her.

"Quite free, madame."

She rose and curtsied in response to his salute, and he went out.

After a time Ellena came to kneel by her mistress's chair.

"Madame, you are troubled?"

"No," denied Gabrielle.

"My lord has sent another great chest of richest apparel. Never looked so rich marvels, madame! Will you see it?"

"Not now, Ellena."

The girl cast about for new diversion.

"Madame, when Master Armstrong came to see the chest delivered, a while since Dick the falconer crept after. The little man was going to speak to me when my lord came down the corridor. Ma foi! Dick squealed like a mouse and cowered behind me, hiding! Madame's memory recalls what he was promised by the count if found again near you?"

Gabrielle sat up startled.

"Count Bertrand saw him, Ellena?"

"Yes, madame. My lord's eyes passed over Dick, cold as ice, but he neither passed nor spoke, going by."

"And the falconer?"

"He crawled from behind me, madame, wet his finger in his mouth, and wrote one word across where my lord had trod. His face was a thing to hide from!"

"The word—"

"Nay, I could not see."

Gabrielle stood up, but before the answer reached her lips the long note of a horn sounded from the distant entrance, halting the two women opposite each other.

"A visitor!" exclaimed the maid.

"A visitor to the castle, madame."

With a blind impulse Gabrielle dragged the jeweled band from her hair, tumbling the silken masses about her.

"Haste—make haste!" she cried imperiously. "Call Jacynth and Susan—let them bring whatever is costliest and richest, and dress me now. Let me do justice in my turn! Hasten, I say!"

## CHAPTER V.

### The Silver Cup.

CEDRIC ARMSTRONG was passing the door of the falconry when Dick Court-jambe hurled his small, misshapen body forth and gripped the lieutenant's arm with both clawlike hands.

"I have been whipped," he choked, his face distorted by malignity. "Tied up like a hound and beaten! I! I!"

Cedric nodded his handsome, red-curved head meditatively.

"My lord keeps his promises, Dick."

"So you take it? So? Will you let Oscar's men into the castle to-night?"

"No," flung Cedric.

"No? No? You are pledged to it—you have taken Oscar's gifts. Why not to-night? If you play us false, Armstrong, you shall hang, too. Your own lord shall hang you! You have gone too far to draw out safely; you are snared."



"Well I know it," admitted Cedric gloomily, his ruddy color fading under the tan of sun and wind. "I have been a fool, and am like to pay for it!"

"Then why not do it to-night? Why not?"

"It is too soon, man. Your Oscar is still in London."

"But—"

"I will not," Cedric exploded, roughly casting the little man off. "Beelzebub take you and your Oscar! I will not."

Dick gathered himself up slowly, grinning with rage and pain as he stared after the soldier. Presently he hobbled into the falconry, and, fumbling in a dark corner, drew out a little vial. As he held it to the light the clear horn-note that had aroused Gabrielle in her tower halted him, listening.

The queen's envoy had arrived.

The afternoon sunlight struck cheerily through the rosy contents of the miniature bottle. Dick was too stiff and sore to repeat the grotesque dance with which he celebrated his triumphs, but his ungainly feet shuffled, and he caressed the bottle with murmured endearments, his lizard's eyes glistening.

Afterward he concealed the vial in his green jerkin, and stole out into the castle.

There had been no one in London desirous of undertaking the aggressive mission to Falconmere. They knew there of Count Bertrand; of his deadly feud with his kinsmen, his fame as a soldier, of those campaigns on the Continent and in the East, which had left him richer than report could gage.

They had heard of his stern rule of his people, the skirmishing warfare across the Scotch border where he taught an unskilled enemy something of French and Italian tactics. And most, they had heard of his absolute indifference to laws or consequences.

So it happened that Sir John Harcourt did not ride joyously across the bridge of Falconmere that winter

afternoon, with his small escort. And never was a guest more surprised by his reception.

From the first decorously martial greeting, offered by Cedric Armstrong in the courtyard, to the moment when Sir John was met in the great hall by Count Bertrand himself, with a serene and cordial welcome, there was nothing in the discipline and repose of the castle that accorded with Oscar d'Arsy's wild tales.

"You have ridden far," said Count Bertrand after they had drunk the welcoming cup together. "Doubtless you would rest. In an hour, if the time please you, we will take supper here. Very pleasant it is to receive a friend from the court in our bleak and lonely north."

"And—shall I see the lady countess?" asked the old knight.

As yet neither man had spoken of the object of the visit. Bertrand did not now betray his knowledge of it.

"Surely. *Madame* will descend to sup with us," he responded.

There was nothing more to be said. Sir John went to his chamber to change his riding-dress for one more suitable to the queen's envoy.

Neither he nor Bertrand noticed a small figure scurrying apeline through the corridors on hands and feet, and lurking in the shadowed corners.

Supper in the great hall was an elaborate and spectacular affair. Not in England had Bertrand learned his way of life. When the guest entered at the time set he found a table spread with a luxury borrowed from that Byzantine empire where a Greek Caesar blended Roman splendor with Oriental luxury.

But it was not at the gleam of tinted crystal or sheen of gold and silver vessels that Sir John Harcourt halted to gaze, it was the girl who sat beside Count Bertrand that held his attention.

"Sir John, pray you be presented to my wife," said Bertrand, rising to meet his guest.



"I am honored with my lord in this visit, sir," Gabrielle welcomed in her own, her sweet voice very steady.

Sir John stood quite still, looking at her; and Count Bertrand looked at them both. Ellena had done her work well. Scarcely in London itself could have been found a figure more dazzling than the lady whose pale-gold robes and snowy furs seemed to gather and hold the light, whose least movement started a myriad flashes of color from the jewels she wore.

"Madame," stammered the old man, bewildered. "Madame—"

He could progress no farther. Count Bertrand came to his relief, and presently they were seated together at the table, the first embarrassment past.

With the initial course of the meal, Cedric Armstrong came noiselessly in and took his place behind Count Bertrand's chair. His arms folded, his eyes fixed on the ground, he stood there in statuesque fixity and silence.

The custom was one established since Gabrielle's arrival. The master had received it first with surprise, then with ridicule, but he never actually forbade the attendance, and Cedric persisted in it.

The conversation between Sir John and the count was light and general; of war and camp, and the rebellious factions in the land. Gabrielle did not speak unless addressed, playing with the food before her. Both men watched her curiously; both equally ignorant of what she would say when the queen's message came to be given.

The supper moved on quietly until it closed. Always afterward in telling the story Sir John dwelt upon the fact that he was growing a trifle drowsy after the day's long ride, when he was startled into broad alertness by the count's strange change in expression.

Count Bertrand was speaking and saying nothing, as the girl beside him slowly drew herself erect in her chair; her lips parted, her dark eyes dilating, her slender fingers tightening upon the

arms of the seat as she looked across the hall. Doubt, fear, and unutterable horror struggled across the fair field of her face; it seemed that a visible cry rose in her eyes, but failed to pass her lips.

Involuntarily Sir John turned in his place to follow that gaze, and saw she was looking at the curtained door of entrance.

A single servant had just passed it and was coming across the hall, bearing a salver, upon which stood three tall goblets, two of gold and one of massive silver, doubtless containing the sweet, spiced wine to conclude the meal. There was no one else—nothing to provoke that frozen terror.

Dazed, Sir John turned back, to see that Cedric also had caught sight of the lady's expression and had started forward in his place.

"You will join me in the hope that this may not be your last visit, Sir John," Count Bertrand was saying, stretching out his hand for the silver cup.

Already his fingers touched the stem, when Gabrielle rose in her place, striking aside the tray so fiercely that the goblets rolled crashing to the floor.

"No! No! No!" she cried, her clear tones ringing through the hall. "You must not drink—you shall not! Ah, Marie Vierge, what world is this! Drink not, my lord!"

Bertrand and Sir John rose simultaneously, as Cedric sprang forward and the terrified servant recoiled. Gabrielle stood swaying, her gemmed hands still extended, her small head thrown back.

"Madame, what is this?" demanded the count.

"The wine!" she panted. "The man at the door poured something in the cup."

Gray-white, the servant fell to his knees.

"My lord, I know naught! My lord, I am guiltless," he wailed.

"Not this man. The one beyond the curtain."



Cedric ran to the door indicated. Count Bertrand passed his arm around the shuddering girl and placed her in her chair, then picked up the silver cup. It was very deep, almost vaselike in shape; at least a third of the contents still remained when he set it on the table.

"Can you tell us what you saw, *madame*?" he asked.

"A man—a shadow among the shadows—who leaned over the silver cup with a vial in his hand. The tray was on the little table in the corridor, where this servant had left it a moment since."

"Get up, Martin," Bertrand ordered the kneeling man. "Whom saw you in the corridor when you came?"

"No one, my lord, I swear."

"Is it your custom to leave the tray of cups there?"

"So please you, Master Armstrong told me I served the hippocras too hot, and bade me leave it there to cool."

Cedric, returning from a vain search, stopped short at that speech, then with face aflame snatched the cup from the table.

"My lord, if you believe I know of this, let me drink! If there is poison in the cup, in my ignorance I will drink."

"Stop," Bertrand commanded imperiously. "Is all my household mad to-night? When I accuse you, Cedric, it will be time enough for your defense. *Madame*, you did not recognize this man?"

Gabrielle shook her head.

"I could not tell—he was just a shadow."

"How could the assassin be assured any one person would take the poisoned goblet?" Sir John inquired nervously.

"How do we know for whom it was meant?"

"The silver cup is mine," Count Bertrand explained with brevity. "An old promise makes me choose it and no other drinks from it. But we spend too much thought on this. A secret enemy, a punished serf—some such

one would seek my death. Bring fresh wine. Cedric, take away this cup and feed its dregs to a dog, then watch the result. A disorderly household you will think mine, Sir John; take my apologies for this scene. *Madame*, are you well enough to remain with us?"

Gabrielle lifted her liquid eyes to his steady gray ones.

"I will stay, my lord," she replied, and leaned back on her cushions, spinning pale in her gold-colored draperies.

Cedric Armstrong moved around the table and picked up a filmy heap of gold-streaked gauze, then deliberately knelt on one knee beside Gabrielle's chair.

"Your scarf, my lady," he said.

Startled, she turned and looked into the face always so unfriendly to her. Cedric bore the regard firmly, his blue eyes unflinching. And as she put out her hand to take the scarf he bent his head and touched his lips to her flowing sleeve. The surrender was made in silence. He rose at once, and, taking the silver cup, retired to fulfill Count Bertrand's order.

There fell a pause upon the three who were left together. Sir John sat musing, troubled and uncertain. Gabrielle waited, as she comprehended that Bertrand waited also, for the purpose of the visit to appear.

"*Madame*," the old man said, at last, "you saved your lord's life, a little since. Was it as a Christian or as a wife that you acted?"

She had not asked that question of herself. The color rushed over her cheeks as she glanced at her husband.

"That is a strange saying, sir," she demurred.

"Yet I would ask it, *madame*."

"As both, then," she answered with dignity.

"Do you not hate and fear him then, as is common report?"

This time Bertrand met her glance, his unsmiling eyes absolutely calm.

"You take a curious tone in my house, Sir John," he commented. "Yet



“Speak as you will; if you desire more freedom, I will leave you with my wife.”

“Stay,” the other man urged earnestly. “Count Bertrand, I seem to repay your hospitality with insult, but I am here as an envoy. Clearly I see that Queen Margaret has been deceived, unless much lies hidden in your household. Yet let me beg the countess to reply to questions not put idly or willingly.”

“Answer him, *madame*.”

“No, sir,” complied Gabrielle steadily and gravely.

“You do not hate and fear the count?”

The past weeks rose before her and set themselves against the first day's outrage; she saw the gorgeous rooms of the east tower, and the consideration that had left her at peace in them; she saw Bertrand at bay before the treacherous attack of her lover, and heard again his powerful voice in the command that spared the life that lover had forfeited by every rule of war. And even as she struggled for calm breath, she knew the answer.

“No,” she said, and turned her burning face from Bertrand's sight.

“He does not secretly compel your answer?”

“No.”

The old knight sighed, half in wonder, half in relief; yet looked doubtfully at the famous noble, who sat with gaze bent on the floor and unstirred face.

“*Madame*, it is not true that Count Bertrand forced you to marriage with him against your will? You did not, then, implore Sir Oscar d'Artsy to save you from cruel usage here? It is told in London that you are treated as a serf; that you even suffer blows—”

She checked him by rising to her feet, vibrant with shame and indignation.

“Do I seem so, sir?” she demanded proudly. “Is this the dress of a serf? Do you see here the trace of blows?”

She stretched out her white arms,

standing a glittering figure in the fire-light.

“Justice—let me give justice! As you find me now, so I am every day. As my lord treats me in your presence, so he treats me when alone. And justice to me also: I, a wife, never sent word or message to any man. Pray you believe that, sir; and make your light-tongued London believe. Whoever spoke those things spoke falsely or in error. But—”

Sir John had risen as she rose, and now paused as she paused, his attention breathless. Bertrand never moved, nor showed by any sign that it was his future peace or war, perhaps his life or death on a scaffold that the girl's voice was deciding. Slowly Gabrielle let her arms fall by her side, the transient flush dying from her face.

“But—I was made a wife by force; so much is true. I was betrothed to Sir Oscar d'Artsy when Lord Bertrand took me against my will. That is past—what of it now?”

“*Madame*, the queen offers you her protection, and has given me license to take you to London.”

“For what, sir?”

Sir John cast a troubled glance at the third member of the conference. He was not so inexperienced in men as to translate Bertrand's silence into a promise of yielding the submission demanded.

“To take from Count Bertrand a good not rightfully his, *madame*; to place you in a convent where you may be at peace.”

Gabrielle turned back to her chair. It was a moment before she replied, her hands clasped in her lap.

“Sir, tell the queen it is too late,” she said, her voice low. “I was to wed Sir Oscar; now, that can never be. I am a wife, and my lord has shown me only kindness since that first wrong of taking me. The past is past. I will stay here.”

“I am to carry that answer to the queen's grace?” he asked.

“Carry report of all you have found



here, sir; and say to my lady the queen that I give earnest thanks; but, pray her, things being as they are, to leave all be."

There was a hush; to both soldier and courtier came the sensation that something white and luminous had brushed past their darker view-point and passed on.

"I am an old man," rejoined Sir John, with simplicity. "I have before seen love grow from hate. Falconmere, I am heartily glad of this ending. Forgive me my errand, and to-morrow I will ride home."

"I am not forgiving, but the errand was not yours," Bertrand returned, his composure perfect. "I will remember only the one who sent you. What now, Cedric?"

The lieutenant saluted.

"My lord, the wolf-hound that drank the wine is dead."

"Good. You may go."

Gabrielle made a slight movement.

"Wait, Cedric. You desired something, *madame*?"

"To rest," she responded hurriedly, more embarrassed before her husband than she had been since the day he brought her home. "To go to my room, if you and Sir John have finished with me. And—the corridors are so long and dark, with only my women—if Master Armstrong could attend me—"

"You especially choose Cedric, *madame*?"

She shook her head.

"Only because of the dark. I—I seem to see yet the man beside the silver cup!"

Bertrand rose.

"Sir John, you will excuse me for a brief space. The evening has not been one for gentle nerves. *Madame*, I am as fit a guard as Cedric?"

"I thank you," she murmured.

Sir John kissed her hand, standing to watch the two pass out, followed by the three demure maids from the lower end of the hall.

At the east tower Count Bertrand

bent his head to study the face of the girl. And his own face was strangely stirred.

"You were more generous than wise," he said. "You should have confirmed Oscar's tale and have asked to go to London. My answer might have set you free, some day, either by sword or scaffold."

"You would not have let me go?"

"No, never! Not if I wrecked my fortunes on it—not if I took ship with you for Constantinople and the chances with Paleologus against the Crescent! The man does not live who takes from me a woman I claim. You knew that?"

"I—felt it so. Your pride— But it does not matter; why should I go to a convent? I have peace here."

She faltered on the last words. The recollection of Oscar was like a third presence to them both. For the first time Bertrand's self-control slipped in his wife's presence.

"You should have let me drink from the silver cup!" he exclaimed fiercely. "How know you how long your peace will last?"

"You mean—" she wondered, child-ignorant, lifting the nunlike beauty of her face to him in all innocence.

Bertrand stooped toward her with the swift savagery of the stooping hawk that was his emblem; then he swiftly drew back.

"Go in," he bade harshly, motioning her toward the doorway. "Go in!"

And when she had crossed the threshold, astounded, he flung the heavy door crashing shut between them, closing her within the east tower and himself without.

Terrified, Gabrielle stood still, gazing wide-eyed at her maid.

"What did I do?" she whispered.

"Ellena, how did I anger him?"

Ellena smiled shrewdly and queerly. She was a good girl, but she was not so unworldly as her convent-reared lady.

"Since I am asked, my lord never kissed his wife," she bluntly avowed.

Consternation flooded Gabrielle's



"Oh, no!" she panted. "No, no! Why should he?"

A month had wrought much change in Ellena's opinion of Falconmere and Falconmere's master. Moreover, she had heard tales of Castle Dare that almost reconciled her to the abduction of her mistress. To her practical common sense, there could be but one end to the marriage that had taken place; nor was she sorry to hasten it.

"You are none so ugly, *madame*; nor is my lord, for that," she made dry retort.

Gabrielle fell into a chair, hiding her face in her gold-hued draperies. But before her closed eyes was painted Count Bertrand's strong, passion-moved face; and she neither feared nor hated it.

## CHAPTER VI.

### The Treason.

A RIGID investigation failed to solve the mystery of the silver cup, and Count Bertrand pushed the search no further. But he gave a brief direction to Cedric Armstrong afterward.

"Keep tight hand on your men, Cedric. Sir Oscar d'Artsy is not through with us so easily. Watch for treachery among us."

Cedric saluted, not meeting his chief's eyes.

In those December days Gabrielle found a new occupation.

"My lord, the winter is very hard," she ventured, one evening when she sat with Bertrand at supper. "Your peasants suffer."

"Yes," he assented indifferently.

"I could wish to help them. Some are old or ill, and there are little children. They are hungry!"

He regarded her, surprised, with the surprise of the noble of that arrogant age.

"Madame, you care for them? What are the petty trials of a serf to you?"

"I would help them," she persisted.

"There is such plenty here! If I might go among them—"

"You are mistress here; do as you will. But take Cedric with you. We are not distant from the Scottish border."

It was not of the Scots he thought, however, as he looked at his wife, but of Oscar d'Artsy's covetous eyes. That night of Sir John Harcourt's visit had made no change in relations; Bertrand's self-control had never failed a second time before Gabrielle. Yet the self-knowledge that incident had brought him made him guard her more jealously than before.

So, day after day, Gabrielle and Ellena rode out over the countryside, attended by Cedric Armstrong and a couple of his men. Gabrielle had never known the cause of Cedric's first enmity toward her; she did not know now why he was her friend, but she delighted in his protection and the freedom it gave her.

The good she did shone starlike over the dreariness of the peasants' lives. Many an earthen floor felt the light pressure of her small, velvet-shod foot; many a dull ear learned to listen for the softly accented southern voice.

The snow lay deep on the ground and the preparations for Yuletide were commencing, when the dusk overtook Gabrielle one day, on such an expedition.

"Master Armstrong," she said, coming out of the last hut, "it grows late. Do you take Thomas and go to the cottages beyond the meadows, with the things he bears. I will ride on with Ellena and Peter, lest we be late home and displease Count Bertrand."

Cedric demurred.

"Leave you, my lady? Thomas can go without me."

"Thomas has no knowledge of how all should be dealt. You will overtake us soon."

"Lady, my lord would never pardon me."

"If I wish it, Master Armstrong?" He shook his head soberly. For a



long time Cedric had lost his merry nonchalance, having the air of one carrying some constant anxiety. The household gaily whispered that the countess's charities had depressed his spirits. Certainly, as he looked up at the fading sky and back at his mistress, his expression was uneasy and far from cheerful.

"If I wish it?" Gabrielle repeated.

"If you command, my lady, I must obey. But I beg you not to do so."

"Why not?" she demanded. And as he found no immediate reply: "Go, Master Armstrong; it grows dark, and we are five miles from home."

Very reluctantly he submitted. The victor led her train of two toward Falcommere at a brisk trot.

A trifle farther on the road turned aside and passed through a mile strip of forest-land. Toward this point Cedric's last anxious glance had been directed, and not without reason. As the party entered the avenue of trees a horseman moved down the path to meet them.

The three halted in confusion. Ellena reined in her palfrey with a cry of fear; the man-at-arms pressed forward.

"My lady, he wears not my lord's colors or badge!" he said. "Go you back with the maid and let me on to meet him."

Gabrielle checked him imperiously.

"No!" she forbade breathlessly.

"No!"

The rider was upon them, halting his horse a few yards away.

"Lady Gabrielle, bid your people stand back," he bade. "I have that to say which is not for them."

Gabrielle extended her gloved hand to sign back Ellena and Peter, and rode forward until she faced the other.

"What madness is this, Sir Oscar?" she asked sorrowfully. "Have I not enough of grief without seeing Lord Bertrand's men kill you beneath my eyes? Ah, why are you here?"

"Why did you lie to Harcourt?" he retorted, between his locked teeth.

Stupefied, she looked at him, both of them gray in the reflected light from the snow.

"Or if you told him the truth, why did you *not* lie?" He pressed his horse nearer, the savage anger of his tone according well with his expression. "Gabrielle, you have ruined us both! Your story carried to London would have confirmed mine. If he had tried to keep you, as I know well he would, Bertrand would have been under ban as a traitor and outlaw. You and his wealth were in my grasp, and you—you spoiled all! You look at me—did you not understand, then?"

"I—"

"If you understood, and acted so, you never loved me!"

Suffocating, she raised her hands to her throat.

"I did," she panted. "I did! Oscar, can you say this to me?"

"Yes, and think it," he answered, but more gently. "If I am rough, sweetheart, look at the weary lines in my face; the stains of travel upon my horse and me. Gabrielle, you have killed my credit at court. The queen turned her back upon me in full audience as Harcourt made his report."

"I told only the truth!" she cried.

"It was no time for truth. But we waste time—I love you and I forgive all. I have come for you, my sweet. All this afternoon I have watched the chance of speech with you. Bid your man stay here; if he rebels I will kill him. Before the news reaches Bertrand, and he tracks us, we will be safe in Castle Dare. Come."

"Oscar, do you forget I am well?"

He laughed shortly.

"No, fair saint. Will we live merrily for that? I tell you, Gabrielle—he leaned to bring his face near hers—"I would rather take you as Bertrand's wife than my own. Honied will your kisses be with hate as well as love, since so I grind my heel into his pride and honor. His—Lucifer's! Come, and quickly! I tell you I will love you—cherish you."



Shivering from head to foot she shrank away, her appalled, dark eyes on his piercing, light ones.

"So he might have used me," she stammered giddily. "Instead— Leave me; I will not go."

He seized her horse's bridle.

"I curse my rough tongue! Have I frightened you, *ma mie*? It is over now. Come, and we will fulfil all we dreamed in Normandy. My father will welcome you joyously to our house. Mind not my speech, sweeting. When Sir John told his tale—how you had even thrown down the cup Dick Court-jambe had brewed to save us all, I went near madness. Forgive, as I do."

She held the bridle firmly.

"Wait. Oscar, you knew of the poisoned cup—you let that be done?"

"Are you so dainty of conscience? Surely I knew Dick worked for me—think you he did it without pay? He feared to give the poison himself, until Bertrand had him beaten for some fault, when rage gave him courage. But the chance failed—through you! It may come again; Armstrong has fallen and taken my gifts. Some night he must let my men into Falconmere. But come; we have little time."

"I will not come," she refused. "Go alone. I will not come."

"Gabrielle!" he cried.

"I will not go with you. Sainte Marie, aid me in this!"

With an oath he dragged her horse forward.

"You shall come! Ride on."

"No, no," she combated. "Ellena—Peter—to me!"

The beat of hoofs sounded down the path as Cedric and his companion returned. Ellena screamed loudly; the man with her darted forward as his slow brain grasped the situation. Oscar made a fierce attempt to snatch Gabrielle from her saddle, but was forced back by her rearing horse.

"Come, little fool," he snarled viciously.

"Master Armstrong!" she cried,

beating off the hands that clutched at her. "Help — Master Armstrong! Oscar, go; they will kill you."

Indeed it was time. Peter just missed the noble in a furious thrust, riding at him with leveled spear. Cedric's answering call was at hand. Oscar wrenched his own horse aside, defeated, and plunged into the dark woods, in the direction of Castle Dare.

"Follow him not," Gabrielle gasped, striving to quiet her plunging mount. "Stay, Peter!"

"Lady, lady!" Cedric called, dashing up to them, his voice hoarse with bitter anxiety. "What is this? Who—"

"Do not follow him! Stay here!"

Cedric cast one glance after the rider crashing through the forest undergrowth, a glance not so much of surprise as of fiery wrath, then swung himself to the ground and ran to take the bridle of Gabrielle's horse.

"Lady, you are unharmed?"

"Yes," she panted. "Yes. Let no one dismount—let us go home; only let us go home."

Bewildered and alarmed, the rest of the party regarded each other, dazed by the suddenness of the whole event.

Gabrielle recovered herself first; chiefly from her desperate desire for the safety and refuge of that castle she had once called a prison. It seemed to her, in this moment of panic, that within those grim stone walls lay the only security on earth.

"Let us go home," she repeated.

"Mount and march," Cedric commanded curtly. "Heard you not the countess?"

And returning to his own saddle, he marshaled them home.

Falconmere was all alight when they rode into the courtyard. Count Bertrand himself, still in his hunting dress, met them.

"Too late an hour, Cedric," he commented. "Could you not warn *madame* of the short winter day?"

Cedric, already dismounted, answered before Gabrielle could interpose:



"My lord, the lady countess was attacked in the forest, and we were so delayed."

"Attacked! By whom?"

"My lord, when I was not with her."

Bertrand looked at him.

"When you were not with her?" he repeated, in the icily quiet tone Falcommere had learned to shrink from as from the glint of naked steel.

"The fault was mine," Gabrielle explained hastily. "It was I who commanded Master Armstrong to go on an errand. He had no choice, my lord; indeed, he did protest."

"So? Then for the future take a command from me, Cedric: for no cause will you leave sight of your mistress when you attend her out, unless I am there. *Madame*, you will excuse this overrule of you; you know nothing of our country's dangers."

"I am content with what you do," she responded, like a wearied child.

So brief had been the moment since their arrival that Gabrielle was still in the saddle and Count Bertrand on the steps of the castle itself. Now, as she moved, Cedric sprang to aid her dismount.

But Gabrielle, already overwrought, recoiled sharply, flinging out her hand in horrified repugnance.

"Do not touch me!" she exclaimed with vehemence. "Oh, that is over—I am ill—Not you; not now!"

Cedric drew back as from a blow, his hand falling by his side. The whole courtyard stood amazed; the servants bearing lights let them waver while they stared; the sentries by the gate turned in their places to see. This to Cedric Armstrong, her chosen cavalier and guard, from the gracious Gabrielle—this tacit condemnation given before the master!

In the hush of stupefaction Count Bertrand descended the steps.

"Permit me, *madame*," he offered.

She swayed toward him and let him lift her down. For a moment her supple, soft body rested in his arms, and

she leaned willingly on his broad breast.

On the threshold she stayed, hesitating; gazing back to where Cedric still remained motionless, his face set and strange in the white reflection of the snow and the wavering torchlight.

Count Bertrand waited, but she said nothing, only shivering nervously as she turned away.

They went in.

At the door of the east tower Gabrielle aroused herself and looked up at the ruler of her small world.

"I would ask time to think," she said appealingly. "I am weary, confused—give me until to-morrow! I know I must speak—"

"Either you or Cedric, *madame*."

She moved a little distance into the room, laying her hand on a table for support.

"Master Armstrong is innocent of all fault toward me," she stated. "To me he has not changed in any way, or done aught that you might not have witnessed, my lord. It is—for other cause that I—I do ask you from my heart to leave this matter now; and not to question Master Armstrong or punish him for an act of mine which he cannot understand."

Bertrand studied her, his gray eyes inscrutable.

"How many men attacked your party in the forest, *madame*?"

"One," she answered, her head bent.

"One?" He came into the room to place her chair nearer the hearth.

"*Madame*, you are wet with snow; you had best call your women. Since you wish it, I will wait your explanation before I require Cedric's."

"I thank you," she murmured with quivering lips.

When Ellena found her, a little later, she was kneeling at her *prayer*; still in her snow-wet dress, inundated with the waves of her heavy, damp hair that had escaped its bonds.

Count Bertrand supped alone that



night. The countess was too weary to appear. Cedric came to his chosen station behind the master's chair, as always; failing in no duty. The atmosphere was not gay.

Afterward Count Bertrand retired to his own apartments, and Cedric went to the room where Dick Court-jambe lived with the falcons.

That cabinet where Cedric had found his chief at work on the first morning of Gabrielle's arrival was always brightly lighted at night. Count Bertrand slept but few hours, a soldier's restless habit, and his windows shone out across the countryside when all the castle else was dark. So the humor seized him this night, and he sat late among the strange writings and scrolls that littered his table.

The crystal - and - ivory hour - glass had been turned five times since the supper, when a knock sounded on the door.

"Enter," Count Bertrand bade, not looking up from his reading.

The massive door opened and reclosed almost without sound; the soft rustle of trailing robes crossed the unaccustomed floor. After an instant Bertrand raised his head, and, for the first time in their life together, saw Gabrielle standing in his room.

"Madame!" he exclaimed, rising.

"You gave me until to-morrow," she said. "But I dared not wait. So much might happen in a night, and the blame mine! My lord, I pray you send for Master Armstrong; it is right that he should hear what I must say."

First he led her to a chair, with the formal courtesy never forgotten between them. Then he summoned one of the drowsy servants from the hall.

"Bid Cedric Armstrong come here," he ordered, and returned to his seat.

The hour, the sense of stern seriousness in the event to come, and Gabrielle's timidity before her companion held the two silent. The hush of the sleeping castle crept into the room where Count Bertrand watched

his wife with a somber wonder at the thing that had overtaken him with the coming of this frail girl into his house.

And when Cedric had entered he brought no discordant element; simply saluting and standing at grave attention.

"Madame?" invited Bertrand quietly.

Gabrielle rose and moved out before the table. She had changed her riding-habit, and in her gleaming white robes, to which the ruby cross she wore lent a fiery touch of color, she seemed a luminous alien to the place and scene.

"Sit you there, my lord," she urged, as Bertrand would have risen also. "Let us two stand here. For, as judge, you are to listen. I have asked you send for Master Armstrong because of that, desiring frankness above all things."

Bertrand resumed his seat behind the table. His arms folded, his auburn head slightly bent, Cedric waited, martially impassive.

"All to-night I have struggled with doubt and anguish," Gabrielle said unsteadily. "For men's lives hang on my speech, and of giving death I have a dread beyond my telling. Yet—I am your wife, Lord Bertrand! I owe you for much kindness; to-day I have realized how much." She caught her breath, faltering. "Oh, my lord, you, whom neither fear nor pity nor anger can blind or swerve aside; you, whose justice wavers for no cause or passion—decide for me. Decide for me, you who make your own stern law—I have learned to-day, from one who was once my friend, what, as loyal to the bread I eat and the name I have taken, I should tell to you. Is it right that I should speak?"

"It is right that you should speak, madame," answered Count Bertrand.

She lifted the ruby cross to her lips, and there was a pause.

"Since first you brought me to Falconmere," she said, "there has been one man who pursued me with such



loathsome whispers and suggestions, such efforts to turn my grief to crime and revenge, as I have no heart to repeat. He stole upon my unguarded moments, he watched for me in lonely corridors to press his hateful arguments, until my horror of him grew so great that you saw it and forbade him to approach me. I knew that to tell you of his speeches would free me of this; but because he only hinted of what I myself might do, and because he was a cripple and I felt I would sentence him to death, I kept silence. I truly believed he would venture to do no harm, himself. Then came the night of the silver cup."

She paused, her dark eyes dilating at the recollection, and drew a step nearer the table.

"I did not see plainly the man who emptied a vial into the cup, or I would have spoken then. I guessed, but I did not know. So I waited. Yesterday, I—yesterday a rider from Castle Dare met me in the forest. Need I say who, my lord?"

"There is no need, *madame*."

She laid one hand over her hurrying heart, meeting his gaze.

"He told me, speaking in the heat of anger with me, that there was treachery in Falconmere. He told me that Dick, your falconer, had poisoned the silver cup because you had him punished for following me against your order. He knew the man was guilty, and might try again."

There are habits purely mechanical. Bertrand leaned to turn the spent hour-glass before replying, poising the glittering toy in his strong, white fingers with a certain preoccupation.

"I give you my thanks, *madame*," he responded. "Nor let your tenderness feel the burden of this accusation too heavy; I have suspected Dick these many days. Such animals are ever venomous."

"There is more," Gabrielle said faintly.

"I wait what it may please you to tell me."

She looked at the judge's still face, then something ran wet and bright across the dark luster of her eyes as she turned to the other man.

"Oh, Master Armstrong, I am sorry!" she cried piteously. "You have been a gentle cavalier and true guardian to me for long. I can scarcely believe this; I pray that you may prove me wrong. Oh, my lord, judge not hastily! Sir Oscar told me that Master Armstrong had fallen, and had taken his gifts to betray you by opening the gates of Falconmere, at night, to the Castle Dare men-at-arms."

At once, under Oscar's telltale glance in the hall, dull crimson surged to Cedric's brows, the color receding again to leave him paler than before. But he did not move or speak, or feign surprise; nor did he look at either of the two who looked at him. None of the three then realized that the agitated witness had spoken aloud the name she had sought to veil.

"Do you answer nothing, Cedric?" asked Count Bertrand, with the calm that told so little to his listeners.

Perhaps through his example the officer kept in control the storm that shook him.

"My lord, once you promised me time to make my defense, if ever I were so accused," he reminded, his voice strained and unfamiliar.

"There is no need to recall to me a promise given; I do not forget. Is that what you ask of me now?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Good. You may go."

"I am under arrest, my lord?"

"No; you are free."

Cedric saluted, then quietly walked over to Gabrielle and, sinking on one knee before her, took the hand she extended and touched his lips to it.

"Lady, I do you as much honor in my heart as once I did you wrong," he said earnestly. "For, until the night when you saved my lord from drinking of the silver cup, I did believe Dick's tale that you were leagued with



him for evil. And whether this matter shall end in my life or death, I am your grateful servant and beg you to spend no troubled thought because of me."

He rose, waiting for no reply; saluted Bertrand again, and left the room. Gabrielle turned blindly to the nearest chair, and, sinking into it, hid her face upon its broad arm.

Count Bertrand regarded her for many moments. Once he passed his hand across his forehead with an impatient, incredulous gesture; as a man, always robust and strong, who finds himself in pain. Finally he turned his head away and fixed his moody gaze on the spot where Cedric had lately stood.

The golden sands in the hour-glass ran out unheeded.

"My lord, I would go back," Gabrielle at last said.

Bertrand turned to her at once.

"You came alone?" he questioned almost gently.

"Yes. I could not bring even Ellen to witness this disgrace to Master Armstrong. It was so hard, without that! But I was not sure of the way—and the corridors were so long and dark—"

He pushed aside the writings that engaged him earlier, and the rustle drew her startled glance. If her eyes could have deciphered those illuminated sheets of Greek script, Gabrielle might have learned much of her husband's life that no one else in England knew, and the wild romance might have helped them both. But his voice called her attention from them, almost as she looked.

"I will conduct you back. *Madame*, I know well that your act to-night, like that of the night when you thrust the silver cup from my lips, was the result of your high honor and sense of right. I do not thank you, because I am not presumptuous enough to fancy you had any thought for me in this matter. I have not deserved consideration from you. I do not ask it. But you

have granted me one grace that I shall not forget. *Madame*, I thank you for your trust in me as judge. And I believe you will rest content with my decisions."

Her heavy fringe of lashes fell, as she inclined her head in acknowledgment. She wanted to protest, to cry that it was not as he thought—that it was the picture of his death at the hands of Oscar's men, surprised as he slept and overpowered, that had driven her to his room at this hour. But a strange fear that was different from any fear she had ever felt held her dumb.

"I have learned to-day to value honor and justice," she said presently, "even though I am bruised between them. I am weary and very sorrowful; with your permission, I will go now."

He rose, but remained for an instant by the table, his stern and classically severe profile outlined by the taper-light.

"It is not my honor and justice which have bruised you, *madame*, but my dishonor and injustice. My own passions I consulted in bringing you here; the return you make is to save my life and castle. If it is a satisfaction to you to know it, I suffer a penalty your innocence cannot fathom. If there is any way that I can make your own life less bitter, I ask you to name it."

"There is nothing," she refused, just audibly. "If I should ask anything of your kindness, it would be to deal leniently with Master Armstrong."

"Cedric Armstrong must make his own plea, *madame*. Yet I think you need have little care for him; I know my men. Shall we go?"

She laid her hand on his arm and they went back to the east tower. At the door he saluted her and she swept her curtsy to him, neither speaking a word.

Count Bertrand went back to his own room, through the silent castle,



and took his old seat. The evening ran out, midnight was called from post to post on the snow-piled walls, but he did not move or seek his rest.

Gradually the lights in the sconces burned out and the lofty spaces of the room sank into the semiobscurity of the fire-light.

Toward morning the log on the hearth abruptly collapsed in rosy ruin, and, shooting up a long tongue of flame for the last time revealed Count Bertrand still in his chair beside the table. But the head that had bent to no man had fallen upon his arms.

When the pearl tints of dawn showed against the window the vigil ended. It promised to be a fair day. Little violet clouds lay along the horizon, and rose-colored mists curled above a sea whose broad bosom still heaved after the spent tempest. They lay there like a delicate woman on the breast of her lover, the watcher reflected idly, and his stern gray eyes warmed and lightened. He rose with an impatient movement and went to the door.

In the outer corridor it was still gray dusk, but through the dimness glimmered a white figure, lying in the chair where the attendant page usually waited his master's orders. But this attendant was no page. Count Bertrand took a step forward—and saw his stolen wife asleep before his door.

"Madame!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Madame!"

With a faint cry, Gabrielle started up, then sank back, striving to hide her burning face with her small fingers.

"Pardon," she articulated.

"Pardon? For what? Why are you here?"

"I followed you back—after you took me to the east tower. You had no guard at your door—Master Armstrong is gone—and I feared the man Dick—"

Shaken as he had never been before by danger, Bertrand stooped above her.

"You guarded me? Gabrielle,

Gabrielle, does duty carry you far?"

There was a silence. At him she dared not look, yet felt his glance as one feels the presence of flame.

"Not—duty," she whispered, audibly.

She was swept into his arms, held against his breast; his strong, gentle touch lifted her face to meet his gaze. Never had Oscar looked at her like that, never would any other man. She saw Lucifer's eyes were wet.

"Love, then?" he asked, his voice strange to her.

"Yes!" she cried, suddenly and splendidly unafraid. "Yes, my lord, yes!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### Cedric's Way.

THE dawn that brought love to Bertrand and Gabrielle d'Arsy shone coldly gray into the deserted hut where Oscar d'Arsy had passed his night.

It was no light purpose that had induced the noble to sleep here, alone in a miserable peasant's hovel on the edge of a mountain pass; perhaps it was the consciousness of that purpose which made him start awake with curdled blood at the ring of a spurred step in the room.

He awoke when it was too late. Cedric Armstrong was bending over him, a dagger touched cold against his throat.

"Lie still," advised the officer. "The man you called traitor has come to keep my lord's tryst."

Oscar's glance flashed around the room, bare of all help. In that moment he realized what treachery had met his own.

"Dick"—he essayed.

"Aye, fox trapped fox. Dick told me how you planned to lie here to-night, on this cliff, and launch the hanging rock down to crush my lord as he rode beneath this morning."



have drawn your sword and dagger; this is the end."  
 "You would not murder me, Armstrong? Give me my sword—I will fight you."

Cedric laughed grimly.  
 "You have fought in the dark, with poison and trickery. It is too late! Sir Oscar, I am accused of treason to my lord, with you. None knows better than you now that it is not so—that I played with you and Dick only to trap you in your black schemes. Rise and write that down for me to show my lord. Out on you, to ask fair play of me!"

"Bertrand—"  
 "My lord would give you a sword and accept your challenge, though he knew you should slay him! But I am a plain soldier and no gentleman. Rise and write as I bid you, for the steel is at your neck. There are the tools for writing, on that shelf."

"You would stab me? Armstrong, Bertrand and I are enemies, but he would hold it his duty as a noble to hang the vassal who dared murder his kinsman."

"I know my lord," answered Cedric very dryly. "And I have no mind to hang for you, unless you force me. Rise and write."

Slowly Oscar dragged himself erect, haggard with hate and fear, his crafty brain seeking hope of escape. Cedric's hand on his arm, Cedric's steel pressing him, he took the pen and wrote.

"I can read," the officer warned, suggestively.

He wrote slowly, making the vindication full and complete in his desire to gain time. But it came to an end at last.

"Sign," bade Cedric.

Oscar signed, his face twitching with sullen fury. Cedric put the paper in his breast and nodded to the door.

"March out. Try no tricks, for my steel is close as ever."

The glen of Ripple Brook was very

deep, lined with jutting rocks now masked in soft, ermine-pure drifts of snow. As the two men halted at its brink the silver tinkle of a waterfall far below came musically to their ears.

Abruptly Cedric flung away the dagger that he held and leaped back a pace, his blue eyes sparkling challenge.

"You shall not boast to the imps that I feared you," he mocked. "Empty-handed are we both—save yourself an' you can!"

Oscar's hand darted to his breast, clutching a dagger concealed there. Straight at his enemy he sprang, weapon poised; triumphant in the knowledge that the other man was unarmed.

The attack was fairly met. Still laughing, Cedric struck the knife aside with his left hand, and his clenched right struck the noble's chin with an impact like a hammer.

Oscar reeled back, and over the chasm's edge as his foe had planned. His body crashed down from point to point, starting avalanches of loose stone that clattered after; the winter dawn's stillness was broken by hideous clamor. But never again was there a cry from the man who had gone stunned to his death.

Cedric Armstrong came to the brink and looked down presently. The dark figure rested across the ice-sheathed brook, whose waters ran stained away and tinkled no less musically because of it.

After a moment, Cedric brought the dead noble's sword and dagger, and tossed them down where the fall might have shaken them from their scabbards. The evidence was complete. Sir Oscar d'Arsy had made a misstep on the cliff's snowy edge; searchers could find no more. Humming a snatch of border melody, Cedric Armstrong untied his horse from a nearby sapling, mounted, and rode home to Falconmere.